

The Changing Tenor of English in Multicultural Postcolonial Malaysia

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that living languages change over time and space. By this measure it can be stated that the English used in environments different from its origin, would adjust and change to suit its new environments. In the context of Malaysia changes to the institutional role and status of the English language has waxed and waned to a point of near extinction only to re-emerge stronger in the 21st century. However the politics of language policies has not deterred its users from consciously and unconsciously reorienting the language system so that it remained relevant and meaningful to its users. This paper examines some of the challenges and concerns that confront the use and users of English in postcolonial contexts. More specifically the paper discusses some of the changes embodied in Malaysian English as a result of characteristics brought to it by the new language users, their relationships to each other, and their purposes. In discussing the tenor of postcolonial English, the paper argues that changes inscribed in these new varieties are products of real needs and realities in new language speaking contexts.

Introduction

The eminent linguist Michael Halliday (1985) calls the interacting aspects of language in context, as "field, tenor, and mode." Field refers to the topics and actions which language is used to express. Tenor represents the language users, their relationships to each other, and their purposes. Mode concerns the channel through which communication is carried out. By understanding the semiotic properties of a situation (i.e., the values for field, tenor, and mode), language users can predict the meanings that are likely to be exchanged and the language likely to be used. The view of language as a system for meaning potential implies that language is specific to context and therefore must be studied within the social and geographical contexts it operates.

It is widely accepted that living languages change over time and space. By this measure it can be stated that the English used in environments different from its origin, would adjust and change to suit its new environments. By the same token, traditional English speaking countries and societies can no longer claim sole ownership of the language. More importantly it has been acknowledged that local varieties of English are developing and would continue to do so. Such indigenized varieties are spoken mainly as second languages in many ex-British colonies with multilingual populations. The differences between the new varieties and the standard variety may be viewed from the aspects of phonology, syntax and semantics invoked naturally or otherwise to express new identities.

In 1969, Jones, in his article "The Outer Spaces of English" (558-564), wrote:

Man has now visited the moon, and English - well laced with computerese - was the language used to get him there. During most of this century it has become increasingly plain that if our world is finally to have any one language as its common word-money (and the need is self-evident), it will be English. Let it be added, quickly, that this statement of fact carries no built-in implications of Anglo-Saxon superiority in political and cultural patterns; it is an accident of power, inherited from an empire no longer imperial or pre-eminently powerful, just as modern romance languages derive from an empire now centuries in the dust.

(558)

This statement may have sounded bold and prophetic in 1969, but there will be little doubt now that English is well on the way to becoming the world's "word-money". The present-day world status of English is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial power which peaked towards the end of the 19th century (Kachru 1982, Platt et al. 1984, Cheshire 1991) and the emergence of the United States as a leading economic power of the 20th century (Crystal 1995). It is the supremacy of the United States as the only remaining superpower, along with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the liberalisation of China, that continues to reinforce the position of English today (Crystal 1995: 106). English is the official or dominant language of over 60 countries, and the second or foreign language in many others. McArthur (1987:324)

estimated that at the beginning of the 1980s, the number of English speakers was: 300 million native speakers of English (ENL), 300 million English second-language speakers (ESL), and 100 million English as foreign language speakers (EFL). Whilst the classification of English speakers into the three categories is problematic because it operates at the macro level of nations and geographical divides, nevertheless the estimated figure of 700 million illustrates the position of English as a world language. It also becomes evident from the figures that non-native speakers are beginning to outnumber native-speakers (Kachru 1982). Today, the number of speakers of English is estimated to be over one billion. The top ten English speaking nation as per speakers to nearest million are as follows; India (350 million), the United States of America (251 million), the Peoples Republic of China (250 million), the United Kingdom (60 million), the Philippines (43 million), Germany (36 million), Canada (25 million), Australia (17 million), Pakistan (17 million) and France (16 million) (Wikipedia, 2006). Malaysia ranks at number seventeen with 7.4 million speakers. These figures re-emphasize that non-native English language speakers far outnumber the native speakers.

This paper examines some of the challenges and concerns that confront the use and users of English in postcolonial contexts. The exploration will be contextualised to the Malaysian situation, a nation colonised for over 400 years; first by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, the British, the Japanese and finally the British once more. More specifically the paper explores some of the changes embodied in English as a result of characteristics brought to it by the new language users, their relationships to each other, and their purposes. In discussing the tenor of postcolonial English, the paper argues that changes inscribed in these new varieties are products of real needs and realities in new language speaking contexts.

English in Postcolonial Societies

The motivation to learn English in postcolonial nations like Malaysia, is no longer the compulsion of imperialistic colonialism. Current motivation is partly directed by politics, and primarily driven by the growth of information technology in science and technology and world economics. Crystal (1995:106) suggests six reasons for the spread of the English language; historical (i.e. as a result of a colonial legacy); internal politics (i.e. the maintenance of English as a neutral language of communication between different ethnic groups); external economic reasons (i.e. to participate in international trade and

business); practical reasons (i.e. for international utilitarian functions); intellectual reasons (i.e. for acquisition of information on science, technology and on academic subjects); and entertainment (i.e. to be part of the mainstream popular culture). The apparent difference between the present-day spread of the English language to that of the colonial period is that it is “natural, neutral and mutually beneficial” (Pennycook 1994: 9): natural, as it is the result of globalisation; neutral, for it is considered a transparent medium of communication; and mutually beneficial, because of the assumption that international communication occurs on a co-operative and equitable footing.

As a result, English is the most widespread *lingua franca* in the world, a status it has achieved because of its large number of non-native speakers from geographical locations scattered around the world. However, this does not imply homogeneity in the form of English, spoken or written in these countries. Often these varieties, which are distinctly different, are labelled using a combination of geographical and political criteria, i.e. “naming a variety after a nation where it is spoken” (Platt et al. 1984:5). Hence, the label English has been applied to many forms of the language: American English, British English, Indian English, West African English, Singaporean English, Australian English, etc.

This heterogeneous situation gives rise to comparison and evaluation between the varieties which ‘ghettoises’ (Rushdie 1991:21) some while elevating others to the position of standard. The debate among linguists is whether to preserve a primary standard of English, or to acknowledge the numerous varieties of English as legitimate forms. This debate is epitomised by the arguments between Kachru (1982,1985,1992) and Quirk (1985). Kachru (1985:30) asserts that “ native speakers of this (English - my parenthesis) language seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardisation”. For his part Quirk (1985:5-6) states that “the existence of standards...is an endemic feature of our mortal condition and that people feel alienated and disorientated if a standard seems to be missing from any of these areas”. It is because of this that the ‘indigenization’ (Pennycook 1994) and ‘nativisation’ (Kachru 1992) of English is detested by purists who believe in a monomodel of English. More recently the standard–non-standard debate has been taken up and discussed at length in two publications: *Language is Power, The Story of Standard English and Its Enemies* (Honey 1997) and *The English Languages* (McArthur 1998).

In postcolonial contexts, to argue that all Englishes show some form of affinity to a standard, that forms the bridge across which the different varieties are comprehensible, is to reinforce linguistic imperialism. Many feel that the issue of standard is in itself a controversial one. The term standard can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it may suggest the target towards which a language may strive, but may not necessarily want to achieve. Secondly, it may be considered as a dichotomy that differentiates between right and wrong. The latter implies a standard (native-speaker language model) that is correct and superior compared to the variety (non-native speaker model) which is inferior and incorrect. The resistance against such imperialistic attitudes and the need to establish personal as well as communal identities in postcolonial nations result in a series of transformations to the adopted language. Consequently, the new varieties cultivate their own sociological, linguistic and literary expressions.

The basic issue in this debate concerns difference and deviance. Difference may be viewed as a neutral concept explaining and describing the variations that are present in the many varieties of English. Deviance, on the other hand, carries negative value, implying that the varieties of English have subverted and devalued the standard. As Labov (1974:11) explains, the traditional view of non-standard speech as a set of isolated deviations from standard English is often countered by the opposite view: that non-standard dialect should be studied as an isolated system in its own right. This reasoning is based on the fact that new Englishes display a diversity of form and function, the result of linguistic variation and change occurring on a great scale around the world. These variations are products of the interaction between the language and the society in which it is used, the different social needs it serves, the new cultural and ideological load it carries, and the features of the contact languages it assimilates (Platt and Weber 1980, Kachru 1982,1992, Cheshire 1991, Asmah 1992).

To understand the diversity of new Englishes in postcolonial contexts, it is first necessary to understand certain integral features of these Englishes such as: “what were the historical reasons for initiating bilingualism in English; what factors motivated the retention of English after the end of the colonial period; what is the sociolinguistic profile of each variety; and what parameters resulted in the nativisation of English” (Kachru, 1992:6). It is likely that each variety will be found unique. English, in post-colonial societies may have served two purposes: language of imperialism and language

of resistance. As an instrument of resistance, English could then be seen not merely as “a means to engage in struggle, but as a principal site of the struggle, and thus to take up a cultural political project must require a battle over the meanings of English” (Pennycook 1994:264).

The process of “writing back” in English as part of resistance against imperialism and colonialism involved “taking the language and reusing it, for shaping realities” (Pennycook 1994: 262) as seen and experienced by the writers and the language community which is non-native. “Writing back” does not necessarily mean fighting political battles for freedom, but the taking up of “cultural battles and counter discursive positions, and thus involves the broader question of cultural politics” (Pennycook 1994:270). Alternately, the recalcitrant position of “writing back” also means that the “use of standard English, in writing at least, spells certain disaster to the Commonwealth writer whose primary responsibility is to be faithful to (native - my parenthesis) experience” (Avadhesh K. Srivastava 1981). Achebe (1975: 223) addresses this issue when he says “the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new surroundings”. Recreating the language to communicate different cultural experiences is not an immediate process; neither is it an easy one.

Ashcroft and Tiffin (1989: 41) determine two stages in the postcolonial nativisation process: “abrogation”, a denial and refusal of the colonial and metropolitan categories, its standard, and of normative or “correct” usage, its claim to fixed meanings inscribed in words; and “appropriation”, whereby the language is seized and replaced in a specific cultural location. “Post-colonial writing abrogates the privileged centrality of English by using language to signify the difference while employing a sameness which allows it to be understood” (Tiffin 1983:51). By inscribing meaning, writing releases it to a “dense proliferation” of possibilities, and the “myth of centrality” embodied in the concept of a standard language is forever overturned. It is at this moment that “English becomes *english*” (Tiffin *op. cit.*:87). In essence, the argument is that new Englishes are linguistically systematic and culturally autonomous.

The above position may also be explained using a linguistic paradigm. Functional linguists led by Halliday (1978:387,1985:7) have underlined two main operations of English; “pragmatic” and “mathetic”. The “pragmatic function” refers to the language

used as “action” or “a resource for doing with”. The “mathetic function” refers to the language used as mode of “reflection”, “a resource for thinking with” and “the construction of reality”. The “pragmatic function” is vital in the context of global communication and the use of English as an interactive medium in information-transfer, material and economic marketing. The fulfilment of this function is connected to the use of an internationally intelligible English, often more inclined to “standard English” or native-speaker variety of English. The tilt towards Standard English in the “pragmatic function” is subverted in the “mathetic function”. The “mathetic function” allows the speakers the freedom “to construct modern reality”, through “linguistic patterns and discursive practices which systematically construct reality for their users and the meaning associated with that reality” (Kandiah 1995:xxii). The language that performs this function reflects the “users’ model of reality” (*ibid.*). The participation in this language function allows speakers of New Englishes to take control of the language, reshape its linguistic medium and advance new messages aligned with reality as they see, experience and believe it to be.

The process of ‘domesticating’ English for localised purposes demands that the non-native bilingual postcolonial writer is able to express his thought patterns in a culture-specific language within the context of situation. Achebe (1969) says that this process is solely achieved based on instinct than formal judgement. Kachru (1987:128) in setting up some hypotheses concerning bilingual grammar, states that it has to be captured in terms of what sociolinguists call “verbal repertoire” or “code repertoire”, with specific reference to each speech community. These repertoires include characteristics of code mixing, code switching and the adaptation of stylistic and discursal strategies available to the bilingual. These distinctive features may be seen as limiting or extending the text, depending on how one looks at it and what one considers as linguistic innovations. The interpretation of such creativity demands “an identification with the literary sensibility of the bilingual tune with ways of saying and levels of new meaning” (Kachru *op. cit.*:130).

Therefore, English in acquiring international identities also acquires “multiple ownership” (Kachru 1986:31) and the international identities that it has procured are manifested in the form of distinct features in each new variety. These features reside in linguistic choice exhibited by idiosyncrasies of lexis, syntax, or style arbitrated by culture, religion, race, nationality, history, politics and a whole range of other socio-economic

conditions. Nativisation occurs across all levels of social discourse and may be represented as the lectal range of any new English variety. The new English social lectal continuum ranges between: acrolect, i.e. the variety that attempts to approximate standard English; mesolect, an intermediate English variety influenced by local languages at the level of lexis; and basilect, which is a colloquial variety of English greatly influenced by local language lexis, syntax, phonology and style (Platt and Weber 1980, Kachru, 1982, 1992). For the postcolonial, these lectal ranges both present and reinforce social positions in relation to power, culture, ethnicity, education and socio-economics. More importantly the lectal categories may serve as tools to establish nationalism, nationism and national identity, by situating their users away from users of native speaker English and the users of other varieties of new Englishes. Nationalism is reflected in the sense of pride the speakers have for their nationally unique variety of English. Nationism, the group (national) consciousness of its speakers and national identity, as the result of each individual speaker's sense of belonging to the group.

The international and world status of English does not allow it to be bound to any one culture. Smith (1983:10) states that "language and culture may be inextricably tied together but no one language is inextricably tied to any one culture and no one needs to become like native English speakers in order to use English well". The speakers of new Englishes in general do not attempt to imitate the culture of native speakers. This attitude is manifested in the literatures that emerge from these new forms of English.

The key question of whether English be fashioned to adapt and adjust to cultures whose necessities are and have been served by other languages. History has answered this question without a shred of doubt. "English has been shaped and moulded to whatever environment it has been transported to: as a first language in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa; as a second language in the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, India, and in other Commonwealth countries; as a foreign language in almost every other country in the world" (Subramaniam 1977: 22).

A close examination of the structure and organisation of postcolonial English language varieties and literatures would reveal the extent of concessions and liberties taken in the process of nativizing the language. When considering the literatures enriched by the culture, history and experience of postcolonial societies, one becomes aware of the

exercise innovations in order to capture and exhibit the true meaning and reality of these societies. Hence, the process of nativisation includes not only 'deviation' (Kachru 1992:305) in areas of vocabulary, collocation, idiomaticization, syntax, metaphors and rhetorical patterns, but also in the performance of adaptations and experimentations with western and traditional literary forms such as the drama, the novel, the short story and poetry. Kachru (1992:302) explains that 'deviation' can be contextualized in the new 'unenglish' sociolinguistic context in which English functions; its meaning must therefore be derived with reference to the 'use' and 'usage' appropriate to the cultural context. The forces that dictate the move towards deviation require the writer to gain a position of freedom "where necessary, by adjusting the interior landscape of words in order to explore and mediate the permutations of another culture and environment" (Kachru 1987:127).

Non-speakers of the variety and those who are outside these cultural parameters must go through a 'variety of shifts' by making compromises and accommodation to their own English language system in order to understand such varieties. One cannot apply the norms of one variety upon another' (Kachru 1992:306). Bailey and Gorlach (1984:3) illustrate this situation using the following three extreme examples, all versions of Luke 8:22.

1. *One day Jesus jelled into a boat with his mushes, and rokkered to them, "Let's jell over the pani."*

(Anglo-Romani as spoken by travellers in Britain)

2. *And it cam, that on ane o' the days, he gaed intil a boat, he and his disciples, and he said till them, "Lat us gang ower till the other side o' the Loch!"*

(Lowland Scots)

2. *Long wanpela de Jisas I goap long wanpela bot wantaim ol disaipel bilong en. Na em I tokim ol, "Yumi go long hapsait bilong raunwara."*

(the Tok Pisin of Papua New Guinea)

Contrasting the above three examples with a sample of Malaysian English variety further highlights this situation.

3. *De oder day, I went to see dis picture call "Ke Medan Jaya", and I tell you aah it is so stereotype, I dono wat to say laa. Der story like nothing to it, you know, like as dough dey got no fresh idea.*

(Kee Thuan Chye 1992: 140)

These examples present some of the ramifications involved in the issue of new Englishes. All mirror varieties of English, yet people who consider one of them as English may not easily comprehend the other three.

English in Postcolonial Malaysia

One of the first moves made by the British in Malaya was, in 1826, to bring the three major ports of Penang, Melaka and Singapore under a single administration called the British Straits Settlement. By a series of treaties between 1874 and 1895, the British colonial administration took control of nine Malay sultanates using the Resident system (Kennedy 1962). In 1896, the union of the Federated Malay States (Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak and Pahang) was formed as a sister alliance to the Straits Settlement. In 1909, the Anglo-Siamese Treaty was signed, by which the protectorate of the four northern states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu was transferred from Siamese to British hands. With Johor, this brought into place yet another British influenced alliance called the Unfederated Malay States. In 1941, these three sister alliances constituted Malaya (Kennedy 1962). In the meantime, the sultanates of northern Borneo (Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak) also became British protectorates.

The peninsula of Malaya had Indian and Chinese presence long before the coming of the colonials, many of whom had intermarried with local Malays. While the early Indians resided in the northern states of the peninsula, the Chinese were largely located around the ports (Penang, Melaka and Singapore), as well as in small tin and gold mining settlements (Purcell 1948). During the British period more Chinese were encouraged or brought in to work in the mines to meet the growing world demand for tin. This transference of what was for centuries the economic domain of the Malay Sultans to the British, through the involvement of the Chinese, was to have a significant effect on Sino-Malay race relations later (Snodgrass 1980). Chinese secret society activities and their

battles for control of the mines also set the stage for British intervention in the affairs of the Malay states.

Postcolonial nations have normally adopted one of three main approaches with regards to the colonial language. First, there are nations like Singapore who have fully and whole-heartedly embraced the colonial language as their language of commerce, administration and communication. Second, there are nations like Japan who chose to completely discard the colonial language and ascertain national consciousness and identity through an indigenous language. Finally, there are countries like Malaysia who have been often enough at the crossroads of decision making as to the role and status that should be accorded the English language.

The status and position of English in Malaysia during the colonial period was as a language of government, administration and commerce. Understandably, knowledge of English and an English-medium education were crucial to career development and social mobility (Asmah Haji Omar 1992, 1975). In short, it was the language of power.

After independence, English lost its position both as the language of administration and of education (Benson 1990). The Malay language replaced English in almost every formal aspect, although the transition between the institutionalisation of Malay and its complete domination of administration and education took ten years. The Malay language is constitutionally inscribed as the national language, the language of administration and education. Other languages may be used for unofficial purposes (Federal Constitution 1993). The Malay language has been the language of instructions in public schools and institutions of higher education (Education Act 1961, Bock 1971). All government examinations have also been conducted in Malay.

The above development is highlighted by Asmah Haji Omar (1996):

The rise of nationalism which led to the independence of Malaya in 1957 brought with it the importance of Malay as an element of national identity. Malay was the best choice to fulfil this function because of several factors: its indigeneity, its role as a lingua franca, its position as a major language, its possession of high literature, and the fact that it once had

been an important language of administration and diplomacy in the Malay archipelago.

(15)

The Language Act of 1967 relegated English from an alternate, official language to a second language. From 1970, English was phased out as a medium of instruction in all public schools. By the early 1980s, the process had reached the institutions of higher education (Lowenberg 1991). Later, there have also been calls for the addition of an image-building dimension to the development of the Malay language, already assigned national and primary language roles by *fiat* (Asmah Hj. Omar 1996:49).

Further challenges to the use of English appeared in 1971 when the National Cultural Congress initiated moves to define national culture, national identity and national literature. The National Cultural Congress determined that the national culture should be based on the Malay culture, with the addition of suitable and appropriate elements from the Chinese and Indian cultures as measured against the Islamic value system (Solehah Ishak 1987, Ganakumaran Subramaniam 1996). The congress also defined National Literature as only works written in Malay in Malaysia. Other indigenous (e.g. Iban, Bidayuh, Kadazan, Murut, etc.) literatures are considered Regional Literature while works in Chinese, Tamil and English are regarded as Sectional Literature (Solehah Ishak 1987, Ganakumaran Subramaniam 1996)

For a long time English remained a compulsory second language in primary and secondary schools. In institutions of higher education, the lack of resource materials in Malay retains English as a crucial reference language. In spite of a general decline in the use of English, it still remains important as a language of business (in private sectors), social interaction (mainly among non-Malays and Malay elite intellectuals and socialites) and an international language in the country. Even so, some sceptics had written off English as a language of any significance in future Malaysia (see Moag 1982).

Over the last decade, however, the economic boom, together with factors related to globalisation and the age of the internet, has re-asserted the significance of English. With the belief that English can no longer pose a threat to national unity, national identity and dis-entrench the position of the Malay language, Malaysia's administrators have shown a change of heart and decisiveness (not without opposition from nationalists) in

not only stating the significance of possessing a working knowledge of English, but also in actively promoting it. Moves towards “re-establishing English” (Asmah Haji Omar 1992:67) have culminated in policies to allow the use of English for the teaching of scientific and technological subjects at institutions of higher education (Ramayah and Menon 1994). The change in priorities towards English is decided by factors such as the vision to make Malaysia a significant player in world economy by the year 2020, the vision to make Malaysia the centre for regional education, and the plan to create a multi-media super-corridor (see also Asmah Haji Omar 1994).

The change of mood is evident within Malaysia’s socio-cultural environment, no more significantly than in the field of media development. This is demonstrated by the publication of four major English newspapers in the country; The New Straits Times, the Star, The Malay Mail and the Sun. The English dailies also have the third highest circulation after the Malay and Chinese newspapers (Pennycook 1994). Malaysian television also provides a lot of air time for English programmes. Of the five terrestrial television networks, at least four (RTM2, TV3, TV9 and NTV7) provide substantial airtime for programmes in English. Apart from these the satellite (Astro) network also transmits a variety of English-only channels. Most of these programmes are American. Of late, some English programmes have been produced locally. At least six radio stations transmit programmes (mostly musical and talk shows) either partly, or completely, in English. There has also been an increase in English periodicals, journals and literary works.

In the year 2000 literature in English was incorporated as a compulsory study component in the Malaysian English language syllabus for secondary schools. In the year 2003 Malaysian schools began using English as the medium of instruction for mathematics and science at primary 1, secondary 1 and lower 6 levels.

However, English, the language of the once colonial masters and its traditional association to the Christian faith still generates resistance in certain sections of majority Muslim Malaysian society. The nation is continuously confronted with the challenge to educate society on the changed and important role English plays in the world today.

Significantly also the status and role of English is linked to fears and apprehensions about its effect and influence on the success of the Malay language, the preservation of

Malay culture, and the conflict with its indispensability because of its importance as a language of world commerce, education and information technology. Pennycook (1994:217) concludes that “the fortunes of English in Malaysia have waxed and waned and waxed again, and it never seems far from the centre of debate”

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft and Tiffin (1989) express the post-colonial theoretical struggle as one which has:

begun to deal with the problems of transmuting time into space, with the present struggling out of the past, and, like much recent post-colonial literature, it attempts to construct a future. The post-colonial world is one in which destructive cultural encounter is changing into an acceptance of difference on equal terms. Both literary theorists and cultural historians are beginning to recognise cross-culturality as the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation...

(p.36)

This sentiment in post-colonial theory can be further advanced by taking into consideration the use of English in bilingual or multilingual mixed-race societies. The issue of bilingualism and multiculturalism is not a phenomenon localised to post-colonial nations. Today, bilingualism and multiculturalism are evident throughout the world. Even the once supreme colonial powers like Britain, France, Spain and Portugal are readjusting themselves to situations of cultural diversity. The “Re-inventing Britain Conference” held in London in March 1997 is indication to current attempts at the re-formation of identity in a transnational context - an attempt aimed at explaining and understanding “ a culture and community that emerge from the hybrid cosmopolitanism of contemporary metropolitan life” (Homi Bhabha 1997:2).

Even so postcolonial societies, especially the ones once colonised by Britain continue to struggle with the acceptance and use of English. In countries like Malaysia, English, the language of the once colonial masters and its traditional association to the Christian faith still generates resistance. On the other hand, these countries are also confronted with the need and desire to be part of the global world. Under current circumstances, this only seems possible through the use of English as the medium of communication and

knowledge exchange. As a consequence many postcolonial societies continue to grapple with the conflict between need and want - a condition exerted by the coming together of painful histories and modern realities. Consequently, these societies are reluctantly coming to understand that the national need and desire to be part of the 'brave new world' can only be achieved through effective cross-cultural understanding and wider as well as more liberal worldviews (Ganakumaran Subramaniam 2003).

Malaysian English

The discussion on the role and status of English in Malaysia has highlighted the some of the problematics of English in the Malaysian context. It also emphasised that English has been used for varying purposes and with varying degrees of significance in Malaysia for over two centuries. As such, it is not difficult to see why English in Malaysia has acquired local/native flavours. Malaysian English, as a variety, has been discussed and described by many linguists and researchers (Tongue 1979, Platt and Weber 1980, Nalliah and Thiyagarajah 1981, Wong 1983, Platt, Weber and Ho 1984, Lowenberg 1984, 1991, 1992, Baskaran 1987, Benson 1990, Vethamani 1996, Josephine Leela 1998).

Standard Malaysian English is the variety that is taught in schools. This variety is modelled after the British standard. English, as it is used in Malaysia, can be categorised into the following lectal range:

- ◆ Acrolect – English used for official or standard purposes,
- ◆ Mesolect – English used in unofficial and informal circumstances by competent users, and
- ◆ Basilect – patois or 'substandard' use of English.

(Baskaran 1987:4)

Though the Malaysian acrolect is modelled after the British standard, it does not conform to the British pronunciation and intonation structure. The Malaysian acrolect is the most prestigious form of English spoken, and its standardised nature makes it internationally

intelligible (Baskaran 1987, Butler 1996, Vethamani 1996). This variety is promoted in education and spoken by the English educated intellectuals as well as the social elites.

The Malaysian mesolect is permeated with variations. Defining the Malaysian mesolect as substandard (e.g. Tongue 1979, Josephine Leela 1996) would be to approach language variations in postcolonial contexts from a prescriptive or imperialist position when studies (including Josephine Leela's) have shown that the Malaysian mesolect is both systematic and meaningful. Tendencies such as the above and the fear of international unintelligibility locate the mesolect as a local dialect. However, the significance of the mesolect cannot be underplayed. It is second only to Malay as the language of inter-racial communication. It is also the variety of English that is structured to promote social interaction and rapport between Malaysian speakers and listeners of English (Wong 1982).

The Malaysian basilect is filled with substantial degrees of variation in phonology, syntax and lexis. It also contains large amounts of borrowings, and these borrowings vary according to the social and racial background of the interlocutors. Because of its flexibility, the basilect exists only as a spoken form (Baskaran 1987, Butler 1996). The comprehensibility of the basilect depends on the ability of interlocutors to modulate to this level. This involves sharing common grounds of native language knowledge, culture, social etiquette and awareness of social relationships.

Modulation between the lectal range is a possibility but not a certainty. Acrolectal speakers have the most possibility of movement, being able to move down the lectal scale to speak mesolect or basilect. The lectal movement is "a unidirectional downward switch", where the acrolect speaker should have the ability to switch to the mesolect and the basilect and mesolect to switch to the basilect. However, this definition is an idealised one, as, sometimes, acrolectal speakers may not possess the social and cultural know-how crucial in order to speak contextually specific basilect.

Variations in Malaysian English can be found in areas such as:

- ◆ Lexis (see Tongue 1979, Wong 1982, Platt, Weber and Ho 1984, Benson 1990, Lowenberg 1992, Josephine Leela 1998),
- ◆ Syntax (Tongue 1979, Wong 1982, 1983),
- ◆ Simplification of Noun System (Tongue 1971,Wong 1982)
- ◆ Simplification of Verb System (Wong 1982),
- ◆ Simplification of Question Structures (Wong 1982),
- ◆ Simplification of Modal Auxiliary System (Wong 1982),
- ◆ Grammatical Shift (Platt, Weber and Ho 1984),
- ◆ Sentence Connectors (Platt, Weber and Ho 1984),
- ◆ Tense (Platt, Weber and Ho 1984),
- ◆ Accent and Pronunciation (Tongue 1979, Platt, Weber and Ho 1984),
- ◆ Fillers and Interjections (Tongue 1979, Baskaran 1987, Lowenberg 1991),
- ◆ Code Switching (Lowenberg 1991),
- ◆ Loan shift (Josephine Leela 1998),
- ◆ Literal translation from native languages (Josephine Leela 1998), and
- ◆ Repetition (Platt, Weber and Ho 1984).

Recognition of the kind of English commonly spoken in Malaysia (acrolectal and basilectal) as a variety is long overdue. Apart from the numerous studies that have presented the Malaysian variety of English as systematic and meaningful, the inclusion of Malaysianised English lexicogrammatical structures in the Times Chambers Essential English Dictionary (1995) is a significant step towards achieving this target.

Conclusion

The development of English in current contexts may be classified under two broad phases; the liberation and expansion phase and the linguistic pragmatism phase (Saran Kaur 2002). In Malaysia, the liberation and expansion of English has for large parts been through the processes of nativization and the utilization of the language for very specific purposes like international communications. The linguistic pragmatism phase can be related to events in 1990s and in the new millennium. This period is marked by a dramatic change in rhetoric, policy and tenor from one that relegated English to lesser

relevance to another that marks it out as indispensable. Malaysia's current position on English is underlined by the position expressed by Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia:

To compete on equal terms with the world's most advanced countries, Malaysians – as well as most other Asian nationalities – still have some way to go. There are skills that must be learned and values that may yet have to change.... We do not become European simply because we wear a coat and a tie, speak English and practise democracy instead of feudalism. We have to learn the language of international communication, and the language of telecommunications, of computers, of the internet.

(1999:40)

At least for now the age of pragmatism has forced the need for postcolonial nations like Malaysia to negotiate priorities that are related to nationalism and internationalism in favour of the English language. A validation of this negotiation is articulated below:

Learning in English language will reinforce the spirit of nationalism when it is used to bring about development and progress for the country.... True nationalism means doing everything possible for the country, even if it means learning the English language.

(Mahathir Mohamad, 1999)

Many postcolonial nations like Malaysia have for now, either willingly or by necessity accepted the English language as an important one. However, the knowledge of past experiences and the political situation in these countries leave open the possibility of changes to language policies that may once again bastardise English for more than postcolonial reasons. Whatever the institutional eventualities, the tenor of English

spoken in these nations is never likely to be realigned to standard native speaker varieties.

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